The risk of online disinformation in Portugal’s campaign for parliamentary elections on 6 October is relatively low, even though instances of false information are noted on some Facebook pages. Facebook is by far the most important social media platform in Portugal, as well as YouTube. Messaging services owned by Facebook (Facebook messenger, WhatsApp) have also become highly popular.

A number of factors reduce disinformation risks in Portugal: The Portuguese public has a relatively high trust in traditional media (68%) and much less trust in information found on social media (26%). The country is not in the geo-political spotlight, reducing the risk of external disinformation campaigns. According to polls the governing party will win the elections with a significant lead, thus the election does not provide scope for trying to effect a major change by influencing only a few voters.

The parties that are likely to gain parliamentary representation are within the democratic spectrum. Extremist, anti-democratic parties remain insignificant until now. Likewise, the electoral system, based on proportionality, does not allow targeting specific, narrow constituencies to affect the allocation of seats. Stakeholders have a high trust in the integrity of the electoral administration. Lastly, one of the most divisive issues in the rest of the EU, which is much used for disinformation – migration – is not a major issue of controversy in Portugal.

That said, some risk of disinformation exists. The most emotional, hot-button issue is corruption. Portugal’s former Prime Minister Sócrates is on trial for massive, illegal personal enrichment during his term in office, together with other powerful figures of that period. As Sócrates is from the ruling Socialist Party, the case harms the party’s reputation. While it is a legitimate concern, it is also the most used issue for disinformation. In that sense Portugal is more comparable to Brazil than to the rest of the EU.

In Brazil, corruption was the central issue of political debate in the last years. Furthermore, while the expected results are not close, the ruling party may be able to gain an absolute majority of seats in parliament, but it would likely be a slim one (only a few seats).
Disinformation actors may be tempted to try preventing or promoting that scenario.

ISCTE-IUL is monitoring social media debate on public Facebook pages and in public WhatsApp groups during this elections, with support from Democracy Reporting International.

1. SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION, TRUST IN MEDIA

Portugal has just over 10 million inhabitants (2019). Around 8 million (78.2% of the population) use the internet, with 6.7 million of them using social media. Facebook and YouTube are the most important social media platforms, used by 90% of internet users. In terms of messaging apps, Facebook Messenger (71% of internet users) and WhatsApp (61%) are popular as well as Instagram (61%). In contrast to other European countries Twitter does not play significant role (31%). In line with other countries, Facebook has somewhat older audiences whereas WhatsApp tends to be used by a greater percentage of younger people. TV and the internet (including social media) are the predominant ways in which citizens receive their news. According to the 2018 Digital News Report, 84% of respondents indicated that they received their news through television and 83% through the internet (including social media). “Social media” was the choice of 63% of the respondents to this study. Press and radio are distant fourth and fifth in this ranking. This means social media has a relevant place in the media diet of the Portuguese. Furthermore, the Internet (including social media) is cited as the “most important” news source (next to TV) by 33.9%. Social media alone is the most important news source for 15.3% of survey respondents.

There are generational differences in media consumption. The 18-24 (21%) and 25-34 old (24.7%) receive their news through social media. People older than 55 rely mostly on TV (48.5%). 52.3% say they use Facebook to receive news, while 22.2% claim to use YouTube for news, followed by Messenger, WhatsApp and Instagram. In Portugal, Twitter is used for news by just 6.6% of the population.

Messaging apps have grown fast. Both Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp are becoming more significant in the social media landscape. Messenger grew 19.4% in 2018 and WhatsApp grew 11.2%, both relative to the previous year.

Given relatively low adoption of most platforms, Facebook would appear to be the obvious choice for anybody trying to spread disinformation. Given the role of WhatsApp in the Brazilian elections, this tool also deserves attention. The Digital News Report indicates that Portugal had the highest percentage of trust in news (62%) among the 37 countries surveyed, second only to Finland. However, trust in the news is higher on the left leaning respondents than on the right leaning (32.3% versus 9.6%).

Portuguese internet users are highly concerned with the risk of disinformation. More than 71% are worried about separating what is true from what is false on the internet, a percentage, again, second only to Brazil in a survey of 73 countries. Trust in media, on one side, and concern with the issue, on the other, may be good news for the risk of disinformation spreading.

But trust is not evenly distributed between different media. In Portugal people trust mostly television, radio and the print media - home of the mainstream and traditional media - and trust less online content and particularly social media. According to a study by the European Broadcasting Union, radio and television are the media sources that Portuguese trust the most, with 68%, among the 28 countries surveyed. Comparatively, only 41% trust the internet and even less - 26% - trust in what they see on social media.

2. PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

Interest and engagement in politics is very low in Portugal. It ranks at the lowest place of all EU member states according to the standard Eurobarometer 2018. Only six percent of the population show ‘strong’ interest in politics and 49% affirm to have ‘low’ or ‘no interest at all’ in politics. In the last parliamentary elections 2015 voter turnout was 56% and in this year’s European Parliament elections a mere 31%.

Overall, Portuguese citizens tend to trust the government, the parliament and the police above the European average while they tend to trust political parties, regional authorities, public administration, the army and the justice system below the EU average. 43% tend to trust the government, but only 17% trust political parties. The low trust in parties and the low turn-out may indicate that there may be a latent audience for new political parties, as was the case in most other EU member states. New political parties have been created in Portugal, especially on the right-wing but they have not yet become politically relevant.

3. ELECTORAL CONTEXT

NO TIGHT RACE

In contrast to most EU member states, the Portuguese political party landscape has remained relatively stable. According to opinion polls the governing Socialist Party enjoys a significant lead (42%) over the main opposition Social-Democratic Party (PSD), a moderate right-wing party that polls at 31%. Other relevant parties include Bloco Esquerda (BE) which has 9% in the polls, the Communist Party coalition (CDU) with 6% in the polls and the All

3 Raw data from Digital News Report 2019 - Portugal, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism
these parties have democratic credentials, while extremist parties have not gathered any significant support until now.

The 6 October elections are therefore not expected to be tight. There is thus no strong rationale for electoral disinformation to swing narrow results to one or the other side. The results are only tight in one sense: It may be possible for the Socialist Party to win an absolute majority of seats. Some may be tempted to use disinformation to promote or to undermine that scenario.

PROPORTIONAL ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The 230 members of Portugal’s parliament are elected in 22 multi-member constituencies across the country, based on a proportional vote. Again, that system is less attractive to disinformation than more majoritarian elections where disinformation actors can focus on narrow swing constituencies to influence the results and allocation of seats.

ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

The Comissão Nacional de Eleições (CNE) oversees elections in close cooperation with other actors like the Ministry of the Interior. There are strict regulations for the coverage of candidacies in the mainstream media and for the advertising of political projects and proposals during the campaign. However, the CNE members have accused Facebook of ignoring Portuguese law which does not permit paid political advertising in the campaign period. The CNE as well as the media watchdog (Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social – ERC) face legal limitations in overseeing social media and in enforcing the law.

The Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe’s (OSCE) mission of August 2019 reported that its “stakeholders conveyed a high level of trust in the integrity and professionalism of the election administration”. Again, this is a contrast to many other EU member states where extreme right-wing parties started questioning in the impartiality of electoral procedures.

PLATFORM’S RESPONSES

Neither Facebook nor other companies have been reported to give significant attention to Portuguese public debates on their platforms, possibly due to the small market size.

4. POLITICAL CONTEXT

GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS

Portugal is a member of NATO and of the European Union. It is not at the centre of geo-strategic fault lines. The US Army base on the Azores archipelago is considered its most important geostrategic asset.

It is thus not an obvious target for disinformation based on geo-strategic considerations. Some consider that the Brazilian extreme right may try to influence the Portuguese discourse but so far there is little evidence of that.

HOT-BUTTON ISSUES

Contrary to most countries in Europe, neither immigration nor Islam are central issues in Portugal’s political debates. Instead, the most emotive issue is corruption. The former Prime Minister José Sócrates and two dozen once powerful figures face a court trial for massive personal enrichment during Sócrates term in office (2005 – 2011). As Sócrates is from the Socialist party, corruption is a central theme in arguments against the party and an emotional topic for most voters.

A recent poll by ICS and ISCTE in June 2019 has concluded that fighting corruption was the second most important issue for the population, after health issues, with a percentage of 23%. Its relevance increased from 8% within two months. As has been seen in other contexts, disinformation agents may also use sudden, unexpected events for their purposes (such as the fire in Notre Dame), for example wildfires, which have wide public resonance after a devastating fire killed 66 people in 2017.

None of the current parliamentary political parties have raised corruption or immigration as a major issue of debate. These issues are mainly pushed by small parties such as “Nós Cidadãos” (moderate right), “Chega” or “Iniciativa Liberal” (far-right).

This report is part of a project aimed at developing systematic monitoring of social media in elections by non-government actors across the European Union. The project is funded by CIVITATES/Network of European Foundations. This report only represents the views of DRI and ISCTE-IUL.

12 See DN, “A campanha de fake news que está a abalar a Europa”. Available at: https://www.dn.pt/edicao-do-dia/14-abr-2019/interior/a-campanha-de-fake-news-que-esta-a-abalar-a-europa-10793803.html